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ABSTRACT

A study looked into what classroom communication behaviors adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate with teacher effectiveness. Subjects for the study were 155 traditional and 95 adult learners at a large midwestern university. They were administered one of two questionnaires which differed on only one question: some were asked to discuss the best teacher they ever had and others were asked to discuss the worst. The questionnaire was designed to report the nonverbal immediacy, use of humor, use of narratives, and use of self-disclosures of that instructor on Likert-type statements with 5-point response options. While adult and traditional college students did not differ in their evaluations of the nonverbal immediacy of their worst teacher, they did differ in their evaluations of their best teachers. Traditional undergraduates rated their best teacher as more nonverbally immediate than did adult students. However, ratings of the use of humor, narratives and self-disclosures did not differ for the two groups significantly. Also, in some respects the results concur with an earlier study by Comadena (1991). In that project, a significant positive relationship between the use of referent power and teacher effectiveness was observed for traditional students, whereas no significant relationship was observed for adult learners. (A table of data is included; 10 references are attached.) (Author/TB)

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A Comparative Study of the Classroom Communication Behaviors Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students Associate with Teacher Effectiveness

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A Comparative Study of the Classroom Communication Behaviors Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students Associate with Teacher Effectiveness

Abstract

The present study examined the classroom communication behaviors that adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate with highly effective and highly ineffective instructors. One hundred and fifty-five traditional undergraduate students (68 males and 87 females) and 95 adult learners (23 males and 71 females) at a large midwestern university rated the nonverbal immediacy, use of humor, narratives and self-disclosures of either a highly effective or highly ineffective teacher. One significant interaction was identified. Results indicated that the two groups of students did not differ in their evaluations of the nonverbal immediacy of their worst teachers. However, traditional undergraduate students reported that their best teachers were significantly more nonverbally immediate than did the adult learners.

A Comparative Study of the Classroom Communication Behaviors Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students Associate with Teacher Effectiveness

Rationale

Recent comparative studies of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students suggest that these two student groups associate different communicator style variables with teacher effectiveness. Comadena, Semlak and Escott (1992) had adult learners and traditional undergraduate students rate the communicator style and the overall effectiveness of their instructors. Results indicated that, for traditional undergraduate students, an effective teacher was one who was able to create and leave a lasting impression, was friendly and attentive to those with whom they interacted. For adult learners, an effective teacher was one who was able to leave a lasting impression, friendly, relaxed, attentive, non-dominant, and precise in his or her communications with students. This project also revealed that teacher communicator style accounted for more variation in teacher effectiveness in adult learners (R-square=.64) than for traditional undergraduate students (R-square=.43). This finding suggests that teacher communication behavior may be more strongly associated with teacher effectiveness for adults than for traditional undergraduate students.

In a follow-up study (Comadena, Semlak, Shaffer, & Escott, 1991), the relationship between teacher power and teacher effectiveness differed for traditional

undergraduates and adult learners. For traditional undergraduate students and adult learners, teacher use of expert power was associated with teacher effectiveness. However, traditional undergraduate students associated the use of referent power with teacher effectiveness while adult learners associated the absence of threats and punishment (coercive power) with teacher effectiveness. The results of these two projects suggest that adult learners prefer a classroom atmosphere characterized by informality and equality, and not one of "formality, semi-anonymity, and status differentiation between teacher and student" (Knowles, 1987, p.47).

The results of this developing body of research suggest that instructors may need to make subtle adjustments in their classroom communication behaviors when working with these two student groups. Communication strategies that work with one student audience may not work with another. Norton (1983) maintains that a number of contextual, situational, and temporal factors associated with an interaction may affect the communicator styles exhibited by interactants. In an attempt to more clearly identify the types of adjustments an instructor may need to make when working with these two student groups, the present study was undertaken.

Research in instructional communication has identified a number of communication variables, in addition to teacher communicator style and teacher use of power, that may have a

significant effect on the social atmosphere of a classroom, student learning and student affective evaluations of teacher and course content. For example, two studies (Nussbaum, Comadena, & Holladay, 1987; Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988) indicate that teacher use of humor, self-disclosure, and narratives are associated with teacher effectiveness. In both projects, effective teachers used more humor, more self-disclosures, and more narratives than their less effective counterparts. Research on nonverbal immediacy in classroom also suggests that teacher immediacy is positively related to teacher effectiveness (Andersen & Andersen, 1987; Gorham, 1988) and student learning (Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987; Kelley & Gorham, 1988).

The purpose of the present study, then, was to explore the classroom communication behaviors that adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate with teacher effectiveness. This study should reveal practical information that may aid instructors who work with adult learners and traditional undergraduate students. The following research question was examined:

> Do adult learners and traditional undergraduate students perceive effective and ineffective teachers to differ in their use of humor, self-disclosure, narratives and in their nonverbal immediacy in the classroom?

Methodology

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 155 traditional undergraduate students (68 males and 87 females) and 95 adult learners (23 males and 71 females) at a large midwestern university. The average age of the adult learners was 22.03 years. The average age of the traditional students was 35.66. The two groups were significantly different in age ($t=-17.62$, $df=135.42$, $p=.000$).

Manipulation & Measurement

Subjects were administered one of two versions of a questionnaire developed for this study.[1] One version asked subjects to recall the best teacher they ever had in their college career. The other version asked subjects to recall the worst teacher they ever had. Except for this manipulation, the two questionnaires were identical. Subjects were asked to recall one of two teachers (the best teacher they ever had vs. the worst teacher they ever had) and report the nonverbal immediacy, use of humor, use of narratives, and use of self-disclosures of that instructor on Likert-type statements with 5-point response options.

To measure teacher immediacy, subjects completed a 13-item nonverbal immediacy scale (adapted from Andersen, 1979). This scale was composed of statements designed to assess the level of physical closeness the instructor displayed in the classroom. The nonverbal immediacy scale

had an internal reliability estimate of .89 (Cronbach's alpha).

Teacher narrative usage was measured with 7 items developed from the results of past research on narrative usage (e.g., Holladay, 1984; Nussbaum et al., 1987). This instrument asked subjects to rate the instructor's ability to tell stories in the classroom, and the uses of such stories in the classroom. The 7-item narrative measure had an internal reliability estimate of .92 (Cronbach's alpha).

Teacher use of humor was measured with 8-items designed to assess how entertaining the instructor was. This scale had an internal reliability estimate of .84 (Cronbach's alpha).

Teacher use of self-disclosure was assessed with 6 items. These items addressed the extent to which the instructor revealed personal information about himself or herself to the class. The 6-item self-disclosure scale had an internal reliability estimate of .79 (Cronbach's alpha).

Instructors teaching sections of adult learners or traditional undergraduate students were contacted and asked to distribute a questionnaire in their classes. Subjects' responses were anonymous.

Statistical Analysis

To answer the research question guiding this investigation, multivariate analysis of variance was performed. In this analysis, questionnaire manipulation (best vs. worst teacher) and student type (adult learners

vs. traditional undergraduates) served as independent variables while teacher use of humor, narratives, self-disclosure, and nonverbal immediacy served as dependent variables. Univariate tests were planned to explore significant multivariate effects. Alpha was set at .05 for all tests of significance.

Results

Results of the MANOVA identified a significant interaction effect (Wilk's lamda=.946, $F(4,245)=3.44$, $p=.009$). Univariate tests conducted on the four dependent variables revealed one significant student-type (adult learner vs. traditional undergraduate) by teacher (best vs. worst) interaction. The two groups of students differed in their evaluations of the nonverbal immediacy of their best and worst teachers ($F(1,248)=3.94$, $p=.048$). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the nonverbal immediacy variable. Follow-up t-tests performed to interpret the significant interaction revealed that the two groups of students did not differ in their evaluations of their worst instructors ($t=.08$, $df=125$, $p=.935$). However, the two groups did differ in their evaluations of their best instructors ($t=4.22$, $df=124$, $p=.000$). Traditional undergraduate students perceived their best teachers to be more nonverbally immediate than did the adult learners.[2]

Discussion

The present study was undertaken to determine if adult learners and traditional undergraduate students perceive effective and ineffective teachers to differ in their use of humor, self-disclosure, narratives and nonverbal immediacy in the classroom. Results of data analysis revealed one significant difference between these two groups of students. Adult learners and traditional undergraduate students did not differ in their evaluations of their worst college teacher. However, when their best teacher was evaluated, the two groups were found to be significantly different. Traditional undergraduate students rated their best teacher as more nonverbally immediate than did the adult learners. Ratings of use of humor, use of narratives, and self-disclosure did not differ for the two student groups in their evaluations of their best and worst instructors.

The results of the present study are consistent with those reported by Comadena et al. (1991). In that project, a significant positive relationship between the use of referent power and teacher effectiveness was observed for traditional undergraduate students ($r=.24$, $p=.021$), whereas no significant relationship was observed for adult learners ($r=.09$, $p=.173$). It appears that adult learners, while expecting effective instructors to display a social and psychological closeness with their classes through nonverbal immediacy cues, prefer a more distant relationship with their instructors than traditional undergraduate students.

Instructors who are highly affiliative and attempt to use their affilativeness as a foundation for influence may violate the "expectations" that adults have of the role of professional educators. Alternatively, an overly affiliative instructor may create anxiety in adult learners which results in lower affective evaluations of the instructor. Future research should further investigate the results of this project and the reasons why adults appear to prefer a more distant relationship with their instructors than traditional undergraduate students.

Since the essence of instruction is communication, instructors must be competent communicators to be effective teachers. Competent communicators are willing and able to adapt their social behaviors to meet the demands of different social situations. The results of the present study, coupled with the results of research reported earlier, suggest that instructors who work with both adult learners and traditional undergraduate students may need to adjust their classroom communication behaviors in order to work effectively with both groups of students.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for teacher nonverbal immediacy by student-type and teacher-type

	Best teacher	Worst teacher
Adults	49.47[a] (4.66)	34.44 (7.69)
Traditionals	53.48[a] (5.36)	34.57 (9.05)

Notes:

1. Table reports means and standard deviations. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

2. Results of t-tests performed to interpret univariate interaction are summarized with superscripts. Means with a common superscript are significantly different from one another ($p < .05$, two-tailed).

Notes

1. The data reported in the present paper were obtained as part of a large comparative study of adult learners' and traditional undergraduate students' perceptions of classroom communication behaviors associated with teacher effectiveness.

2. The multivariate main effect for instructor-type (best vs. worst) was also statistically significant (Wilk's lamda=.339, $F(4,245)=119.63$, $p=.000$). Univariate F-tests for each of the five dependent variables were also statistically significant. The best teacher was rated significantly more immediate ($F(1,248)= 349.87$), more humorous ($F(1,248)=158.63$), more likely to use narratives ($F(1,248)=289.62$), and more likely to engage in self-disclosure ($F(1,248)=50.44$). These results are not discussed in this report since the focus of the present study was on the interaction between teacher-type and student-type on students' evaluations of instructors.

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